

RESPONSE TO SUNSET STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION

November 12, 2014

Dear Chairperson Nelson and Vice Chairperson Price:

My name is Minnie Christal and I am a blind homeowner in Pearland, Texas. I am a facilitator for a grassroots support group in Houston for blind and low vision adults and a charter member of a network of support groups across the greater Houston area known as the Houston Area Visually Impaired Network (HAVIN). I am here to discuss my concerns regarding item 1 of the Sunset Review Commission recommendations as they directly impact the Department of Assistive Rehabilitative Services – Division for Blind Services, hereafter referred to as DARS-DBS. Whereas, one might consider the consolidation of seemingly related agencies under a central entity to be a viable solution which would reduce redundant operations; adequate consideration has not been given to the unique services and consumer needs provided by DARS-DBS.

I have Retinitis Pigmentosa, which is a congenital degenerative disease of the retina. I am considered legally blind based on well established medical criteria. Although I have light perception, I am unable to have my vision sufficiently corrected to successfully perform daily living activities without the help of assistive technology devices, for example this magnification device which allows me to read bold large print, minimally > 24 pt. Prior to losing my sight, I worked over 25 years as a chemist for an international chemical company. Post sight loss, I spent several years as an angry, reticent individual with feelings of no possibility to achieve my ultimate career objectives.

I finally became connected with DARS-DBS. While a consumer with DARS-DBS, I received seven months of blind rehabilitation training at the Criss Cole Center. While there I received Orientation & Mobility training, independent living skills, learned to read and write Braille, and was exposed to assistive technology that was a totally new concept for me. Although not currently employed which can be attributed to other factors, I compile an electronic newsletter which is circulated weekly to over 180 other blind and visually impaired individuals in the local community and shared on Sight into Sound radio. My redirected mission is to provide information and support to others who are “new” to the blind community.

The primary objective of DARS-DBS is to eliminate barriers and increase employment opportunities for people who are blind or visually impaired. Vocational Rehabilitation counselors (VRC) work conscientiously to create an environment in which there are nominal barriers to full employment and participation in community living. This objective is accomplished by providing necessary tools and training which enable blind and visually impaired individuals to function competently and effectively in a sighted world. These individuals (VRC) are knowledgeable of cutting edge technologies that enable blind and visually impaired persons to make positive accomplishments in our personal and professional lives.

A review of archived employment statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) show that in 2013, unemployment rate for working age persons with disabilities is roughly twice the rate of individuals without a disability (12.8% vs 6.7%). It is important to note that the basis for categorizing persons with disabilities was a positive response to a set of conditions (see note 1) without differentiating the type or severity of the disability. However distinguished independent institutions have further refined archived data and report the unemployment rate for blind and visually impaired individuals to consistently range between 60% - 70%. (see note 2) Although some may be disheartened by these statistics, I am encouraged to realize that rapidly evolving technology will continue erode these negative figures and enable blind individuals to continue to make positive strides.

As previously mentioned, a cursory review of the Sunset Review Commission with regards to item 1 might suggest a perceived benefit from consolidation. However, I implore you to consider the overall benefit of having experienced and knowledgeable individuals with a vested interest in helping blind and visually impaired people achieve the confidence and skills to work and make positive contributions to the community.

I will close with an inspirational quote from Terri Meas,

“The real problem of blindness is not the lack of eyesight. The real problem is the misunderstanding and lack of information which exists. If a blind person has proper training and opportunity, blindness is only a physical nuisance.”

Thank you for your time and consideration.

NOTE 1. A person with a disability has at least one of the following conditions: is deaf or has serious difficulty hearing; is blind or has serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses; has serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition; has serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs; has difficulty dressing or bathing; or has difficulty doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor's office or shopping because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition.

NOTE 2. Survey results extracted from report by Edward C. Bell, Ph.D. and Natalia M. Mino
Blind and Visually Impaired Adult Rehabilitation and Employment

Edward C. Bell, Ph.D., serves as director of the Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness, Louisiana Tech University.

Kind Regards,

Minnie K. Christal